

Supervision: A force for change? Three stories told

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Abstract

Drawing on research, we contextualize social work and describe the role of supervisors in child welfare settings in South Africa, England and Sweden. Exploratory frameworks and models of supervision illustrate how it has been influenced by principles of New Public Management and the concluding discussion proposes an agenda for change.

Keywords

child welfare, exploratory frameworks, external supervision, New Public Management, supervision, supervision functions

Introduction

Regulatory policies and procedures in the public sector, that draw on principles informed by neoliberal thinking, are in place in most countries in the developed world. The methods and approaches employed are normally referred to as New Public Management (NPM) or ‘new managerialism’

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(Harlow, 2004; Kolthoff et al., 2007). Such a paradigm is based on ideas from market economics where the main thought is that more effective interventions will arise with the help of competition, freedom of choice and evaluations. The focus is mainly on outcomes, and relational aspects are of less importance. These ideas have been evidenced within the social professions in the recent past by high levels of accountability linked to performance management, efficiency measures and the rise in importance of the consumer in service provision. This mode of working is seen to privilege managerial over professional control of work (Lewis and Glennerster, 1996) and the ways in which supervision is delivered normally sits within this framework. Whether NPM has improved, the quality of practice is a current debate within international social work (Payne and Askeland, 2008). Social work in the developed world is seen by some as a 'failing profession' as evidenced by low morale, recruitment and retention problems, pressure from mounting bureaucracy, and a poor image in the press (Ferguson, 2009). Some would link the tenets of NPM to neoliberal policies that have had a causal effect on the current global economic crisis. What is clear is that the breathtaking amount of government debt within most economies in the developed world is likely to transform current welfare services (Ferguson, 2009).

Change of this potential magnitude provides opportunities to do things differently, and in this article we consider the extent to which supervision could and should be a force for change within the current social work climate. We approach this by considering the extent to which exploratory frameworks and models of supervision help clarify the types of supervision that are currently being practiced. We contextualize the state of social work in South Africa, England and Sweden. Drawing on three independent pieces of research, we outline in the form of three vignettes the profile of a typical supervisor of social workers in child welfare settings. In the concluding discussion we pull together the threads and put forward an agenda for change within supervision.

Functions of supervision

The history and current practice of social work have, despite social work's claimed dependence on the local context, at least two factors in common. First, that of supervision and its part in the development of professionalization of the role. Second, in almost every country child welfare and child protection work are integral parts of its activities. In most countries 'child welfare' is used as an over-arching concept (Spratt and Callan, 2004) and it is the term that we shall use here. The process of implementing child welfare policies has unique country-bound characteristics with different roles

and responsibilities between allied professionals and non-professionals. Nonetheless, professional social workers, albeit in different kinds of agencies, are normally involved in the most difficult assessments. This complex work requires guidance and support that should be found in supervision.

Supervision can be delivered in many forms with different emphasis placed on key functions. In some countries social work supervision is a discrete occupation, linked to specific training and certification. In others it is an activity expected of front line managers in the field, where there are varying degrees of support and training to fulfil this complex task.

Kadushin (1972) claimed that as early as 1901 mention was made in the literature of the functions of supervision, namely support, administration and education, and his subsequent research shows that these functions have formed an integral part of supervision throughout the development of social work. Since the 1970s, the administrative function has received particular attention in social work literature (Munson, 1976). In the 1980s there were calls for the training of supervisors in this aspect in order to enable practitioners to promote more effective services linked to the monitoring and managing of cases (Kadushin and Harkness, 2002). Tsui (2005) describes the educational function of supervision as demonstrated by activities such as teaching, training, staff development, coaching and mentoring. Others have reflected (Kadushin and Harkness, 2002; Rabinowitz, 1987) that it is concerned with the enhancement of knowledge and skills that equip the social worker to provide the best service to the user and that the quality of the service is influenced and directed by the quality of this type of supervision. The demand and need for support as a key function of supervision has been emphasized and researched since the 1920s (Pretzer, 1929). Psychological and interpersonal support in this context is viewed as enabling social workers to mobilize their emotional energy required in order to do the work effectively (Kadushin and Harkness, 2002). Social work is normally a labour intensive, complex and pressured activity and the need for support to help build and maintain a worker's motivation and resilience is widely recognized (Collins, 2007).

The three functions of supervision have withstood the passage of time. They are often presented in the literature as authoritative standards that are apolitical. In practice they appear less neutral and the time spent proportionately on them is likely to reflect the predominant agenda. For example, if the administrative function is over emphasized the underlying ideology within the agency is likely to be management driven and closely linked to principles of NPM. Supervision that is predominantly supportive is more likely to promote a person-centred, professional agenda with a different type of power dynamic between worker and supervisor.

Exploratory frameworks

Freidson (2001) takes a particular interest in aspects of professional control and discretion and puts forward three ideal types that may be seen to govern 'practices of knowledge', such as found in social work, that control the division of labour. The ideal types illustrate a *market logic*, where market relations between buyer and seller are essential; a *management or bureaucratic logic* based on rules and regulations; and a *professional logic* where the specific knowledge and ethics enhanced by a professional occupational group set the standards for professional activities. Freidson (2001) claims that the logics are not operating in complementary ways but rather compete and collide. The professional logic strives for professional control for a specific occupational group, where power and jurisdiction over decision making is claimed. This logic is normally contradictory to that of the market logic where decisions are based on the relations between actors in the market (for example when an external placement is being sought for a child and market driven negotiations ensue). Professional logic is also linked to professional discretion that is exercised in the formulation of assessments that build on specific knowledge in order to take individual- and needs-based decisions. This normally contradicts bureaucratic logic that proposes standardization and routine procedures within the work process.

A second related framework is that constructed by Evetts (2006) in light of her work on different forms of professionalism. She claims that there has been a shift in professionalism for many occupational groups in order to legitimize their activities. She distinguishes between *occupational professionalism* and *organizational professionalism*. In the past occupational groups could rely on their professionalism, based on successful certification and ethical codes of conduct, to create the assumption that they were competent to handle a task. Today legitimacy of this kind is more often created through organizational professionalism, that demands evaluated results of actions (evidence-based practice), and organizational control of activities and personnel. This latter form of professionalism is normally advocated by managers of services, in order to promote and sustain the interests of the organization and this links well to aspects of NPM.

Both these frameworks are helpful in enabling us to understand the nature of supervision and the conditions for and its functions in child welfare agencies. Supervision with its educative and supportive function builds on the knowledge gained by the professional group. The supervisor is expected to have expertise within the specific field of interest, in this case child welfare, as well as in staff support. A managerial logic could also be claimed since decisions taken must be in accordance with the rules, regulations and legislation.

To promote accurate and reliable decisions within budget is also a part of the administrative function of supervision. In terms of the market logic, there are increasing examples of such practices within the NPM paradigm in agencies that also link closely with the managerial logic. The point here is that not only do the logics help to explain aspects of supervision, but they also help draw out the ideologies that inform components of the task.

Country contextualization: South Africa

In South Africa the social work profession was born out of disquiet by the Dutch Reformed Church about poverty, and its response to the welfare needs of its congregations. At the end of the Anglo-Boer War in 1902, Afrikaner women's organizations were established to give assistance to 'poor whites'. By 1937 a national Department of Public Welfare was established and shortly afterwards social work training was introduced in nine South African universities (Müller, 1965). The National Welfare Act of 1965 made registration of social workers possible and paved the way for the Social and Associated Workers Act 110 of 1978 (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1978). Since the 1980s, four-year undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in social work have been offered by all South African universities (McKendrick, 1998) and some have specialized postgraduate courses in social work supervision. The average annual output from 1992 to 2003 from 16 universities was 596 undergraduate social work degrees, 84 Masters degrees and 9 Doctoral degrees (Earl, 2008). Since 2007 all social work curricula at universities has complied with the South African Qualification Authority's (SAQA) requirements for outcomes-based education, as well as meeting specific outcomes identified by a Standard Generating Body (Earl, 2008).

The democratic elections of 1994 that sounded the end of the apartheid political system also resulted in a transformation of social welfare services and of supervision per se. The 1997 White Paper for Social Welfare (Ministry for Welfare and Population Development, 1997) served as a basis for the development of the social welfare services. The South African Council for Social Service Professions that regulates this profession was established in 1998 (SACSSP, 2008). Research (Earl, 2008) indicates that there were 11,111 SACSSP registered social workers in 2005, representing a ratio of 23.6 social workers per 100,000 head of population. For various complicated reasons, but mainly due to poor salaries and working conditions, the political and social transformation in South Africa led to a 'brain drain' of social workers from the country, resulting in a significant shortage of both workers and supervisors (Engelbrecht, 2006). By 2003 social work had been declared a scarce skill by the Department of Social Development

(2006a) and in response, in 2006, it initiated an extended retention strategy. This was an admission that there was a decline in the productivity and quality of social work services, due to high case loads, work related stress and lack of structured supervision. The Department (2006a: 20) also referred to 'poor quality supervisors, who themselves also lack capacity to conduct professional supervision'. Recent research (Engelbrecht, 2008) indicates that the quality of supervision, particularly by supervisors in non-governmental child welfare organizations (NGOs), working under difficult circumstances, is adversely affected. More than 20 percent of South African social workers are in this sector (Earl, 2008). Supervision of social workers is generally regarded as a middle management activity internal to the agency (Engelbrecht, 2008). Its nature and extent are outlined in the Policy Guidelines for the Course of Conduct, the Code of Ethics and the Rules for Social Workers of the Social Work Act (RSA, 1978; SACSSP, 2008).

Country contextualization: England

Social work was developed early in England (1869) by the Charity Organisation Society (COS) that organized volunteers to visit and support the urban poor. It has continued to gain momentum and, it could be argued, reached a high point of professional development in the 1970s. This was an expansionist period, characterized by high levels of professional autonomy and use of discretion (Harris, 1998). In this phase it was the social workers, rather than their supervisors, who were likely to determine the content and focus of supervision (Parsloe, 1981). Criticism of the roles and tasks of practitioners in the late 1970s and beyond linked to damning child protection inquiries, to the rise of Thatcher's New Right and to the introduction of 'new managerialism'. This shift within public sector management has continued under New Labour (Department of Health [DoH], 1998). The case work relationship has given way to more short term focussed work, the output of which is linked to targets to be met by local social work managers (Harlow, 2004).

Social work qualifying training remains generic, despite current criticism that it may not equip workers with the skills and competence to undertake child protection work (Laming, 2009). There are 231 approved courses delivered in 71 higher education institutions. In the academic year 2007/8 a total of 5221 students enrolled mainly on the three year BA in Social Work and a smaller number (24%) on the two year qualifying MA in Social Work (General Social Care Council [GSCC], 2009). Both routes are closely linked to the Department of Health's prescribed curriculum, to academic benchmarking criteria and to the National Occupational Standards (NOS) for Social Workers. Programmes are validated and monitored by the GSCC that

is also responsible for registering and monitoring the quality of professional social workers.

Most newly qualified social workers (known as NQSWs) in the UK are employed in the statutory local authority services on taking up their first appointment (Lyons and Manion, 2004), and a scheme is currently being piloted to provide additional support and protected caseloads in the first phase of work (GSCC, 2009). The recognition that NQSWs are vulnerable was emphasized in a recent report (Laming, 2009) following a child protection scandal. Laming described a state of low morale in a significant number of statutory Children's Services with inexperienced practitioners, high case loads (UNISON, 2008 in Laming, 2009), recruitment and retention problems and pressure on workers, compounded by a hostile press and poor supervision. This profile has been well chronicled in the past 10 years (Commission for Social Care Inspection, 2005; Social Care and Health Workforce Group [SCHWG], 2004).

Country contextualization: Sweden

Social work in Sweden became a university level education in 1921 and programmes are currently offered at 16 universities or university colleges. In several respects social work can be described as a success story. As an occupation it has acquired, since the beginning of the 1980s, considerable academic standing and professionalization. It has become a full academic discipline with professorships, PhD programmes (with over 250 Doctorates awarded to date), together with numerous Masters programmes. The undergraduate route requires high entrance grades and remains popular, reflecting a high level of interest in a social work career. In other respects the situation is not as bright. The salaries of social workers are not as high as would be expected from their educational level. They are often criticized for not relying on evidence, especially when taking action in relation to child protection cases. From time to time hostile stories about such actions are recorded in the press, and social workers are presented in negative ways. Research on the work situation of statutory social workers, particularly in the field of child protection, describes the conditions as very tough compared with other comparable occupations. Social workers are experiencing health difficulties and symptoms that link to work pressures. In this specific area social workers are leaving for other jobs, and leaving the most difficult decisions to the least experienced and youngest social workers (Tham, 2007).

The call for supervision in social work has been very high. The quest was to support workers in their difficult jobs in order to prevent burnout and enable them to remain within the profession. Since the 1980s two parallel

systems of supervision have been functioning. The longest standing takes place within the agency and is normally individual supervision undertaken by front line managers, especially for newly qualified staff. It was criticized for being too focussed on administrative demands that undermined the possibilities for a more supportive, process-orientated supervision. Whilst this existing system remains, a new system was introduced inspired from supervision models in psychotherapy, whereby the supervisor is external to the organization and is contracted to do the work. The task in this context is to focus on the relationship aspects of social work, with particular focus on that with the client. The quest for independent supervision has been largely successful in respect of numbers who receive supervision. In 2002 76% of all practising social workers had supervision, and in the area of child welfare the numbers exceed 90% (Dellgran and Höjer, 2005).

A supervisor in South Africa

Botha (2002), one of the founders of supervision training and practice in South Africa, concludes that research in supervision in this country is not comprehensive. Nonetheless findings by Engelbrecht (2008) into current practices in an NGO that focuses on child protection work, suggests that it is likely to have a resonance with the position of supervisors in similar settings and operating to the same statutory mandates. It is on this research that the following vignette is based.

A supervisor in a child protection agency is normally a woman with a professional social work qualification, aged 30 years or over, with at least five years experience of front line work and registered by the SACSSP. She probably lacks formal training in supervision, but has undergone in-service training as a supervisor. Her post of supervisor is a middle management position within the organization, to which she would have to have applied or been promoted. Supervision of social workers is an internal concern of the agency and consists of diverse management tasks for which the supervisor accepts responsibility. She is, for example, responsible for managing up to 10 social workers whose case loads may consist of as many as 140 households. The case load size recommended by the South African Service Delivery Model is 1:60 (Department of Social Development, 2006b). Due to high turnover and staff shortages, she may have had to assume responsibility for some statutory cases and she spends considerable time overseeing the orientation of new social workers. The supervisor normally has other tasks to fulfil, such as acting as management consultant for the agency's institutions and management committees. Sometimes she will spend more time on these tasks than on supervision. She is however, co-responsible for all statutory services delivered by the social workers, and has to

be co-signatory to statutory reports. In rural areas a social worker may be stationed more than 200 kilometres from the supervisor, in which case most supervision occurs by telephone and in an informal manner. Efforts are made to schedule formal individual sessions averaging two hours each month in accordance with agency requirements. During individual supervision, the main focus is on control of the worker's activities and on handling serious case crises. Group supervision, which sometimes takes place on a quarterly basis, is mainly focussed on staff development. Although the supervisor may realize that her supervisees have much need for support in their work, especially relating to trauma counselling and debriefing, she may not have the time to address these needs and may even display symptoms of burn-out herself. In addition she must complete performance appraisals of the social workers, but there is little concrete incentive, since the agency is likely to be in financial difficulties, the result of shortfalls in government subsidies. Supervisors do not receive formally structured supervision and have to rely on the informal support from colleagues or the director of the organization.

A supervisor in England

Supervision has risen in importance in England in the past decade, mainly due to external concerns triggered by child protection inquiries (Laming, 2003, 2009), employers codes of practice (GSCC, 2004) and government policy that recognizes the complexity of the task (Department for Education and Skills/Department of Health [DfES/DoH], 2006). Within statutory child welfare it is internal to the agency and is normally undertaken by line managers with some senior practitioner involvement.

This vignette draws on the findings of a qualitative study on induction and supervision in two Children's Departments in the north of England (Bradley, 2006). The typical profile of a supervisor in a statutory child welfare agency working mainly with child protection cases is of a woman in her mid thirties with five years of supervisory experience in the same agency where she was a social worker. On promotion, assumptions have been made that since she was a competent practitioner she would make a good supervisor/manager. She may have been carrying, for the first few months, some of her complex cases from practice. During this phase she would be offered a series of 'in house' training in supervision. This would have been a basic introduction and it is unlikely that training at a level higher would have been offered. Her skills as a supervisor have mainly been developed from doing the work and from reflecting on the supervision she received. Her training in preparation to be a practice teacher may have been the most relevant. She knows that good supervision is person-centred, supportive, educative and enabling but

frequently, due to competing priorities, it becomes a more functional discussion about cases and issues concerning accountability. She supervises half of her team and sees, on average, seven social workers, five support workers, plus her assistant team manager on a monthly basis for at least an hour. She gives informal supervision and her door is always open, but she sometimes worries that decisions made 'on the hoof' are not always recorded. She is also concerned that she may not be giving the newly qualified workers the support they need, and most of her supervisees have been appointed directly from qualifying training and have little experience. She is responsible for performance appraisal of the staff she supervises but can offer little in terms of incentives in recognition of high achievement. She feels supported by her line manager but does not like to 'off load' or to suggest that she is not coping as a manager. Supervision, when it happens, is on a 'need to know' basis and her supervisory written work is rarely checked. She sometimes has group supervision with other first line managers and she feels safe and supported in this environment. She often takes work home and much of the time feels pressured from above by imperatives imposed by senior management and below due to the unremitting work pressures. Whilst this profile is compiled from a small study, there are resonances with more recent research on supervision (Skills for Care, 2009) and the wider literature.

A supervisor in Sweden

Today the independent form of supervision is well integrated in most types of social work in Sweden; however, it is unevenly distributed. It is most common in child welfare agencies, and least common in social work with older people and in work with disabilities (Dellgran and Höjer, 2005). The call for external supervision also triggered the start of specific postgraduate education in supervision for social workers, with the aim to have social workers supervised by those qualified in both social work and in the supervision of social workers. The latter is normally awarded at Masters level and covers the theory of supervision as well as education about different supervisory models. One important element that stretches over three semesters is that of being supervised as a supervisor conducting supervision (known as meta-supervision). This normally horizontal career move attracts social workers with longer experience, more formal education and with a commitment and interest in research (Dellgran and Höjer, 2005).

In a study of external supervision in the southwest region of Sweden, the majority of the supervisors were qualified social workers; however, the number of psychologists in this role was almost as high (Höjer et al., 2007). This type of supervision is normally in the form of a group activity which

takes place fortnightly, away from the agency, for two or three hours. The group of social workers normally has substantial influence on the choice of supervisor and a contract of some two to three years duration is signed between agency manager and supervisor. In the research 52 such groups were studied, and around 50% were supervised by female supervisors. The majority of the supervisees were also female (over 80%). When asked about their theoretical stance, most supervisors claimed that their approach was eclectic, although systemic and psychodynamic approaches were also described. Supervisors have their own private firms, often work in quite isolated ways and have to take responsibility for their own supervision. They charge considerable fees with the result that most of the budget for continuing professional development in social work services is spent on external supervision. A supervisor of many groups earns more than a social work middle manager and the aspiration to become a supervisor is high amongst social workers (Dellgran and Höjer, 2005).

Almost half of managers in social work (who normally undertake internal, more administrative forms of supervision) experience conflict with external supervisors with regard to exceeding their mandate, such as interfering in case decision making. In some municipalities attempts have been made to limit the task of external supervision, which has led to protests from social workers, who are normally very satisfied with such activity. This does not stop them, nonetheless, from terminating the supervisory contract. Examples are when supervisors are not perceived to have appropriate knowledge for a specific workplace, are thought to be too passive, and not up-to-date with new ideas. Most social workers with more than six years experience have had at least three external supervisors. This culture is promoted within external supervision and is also directly linked to the normal length of the contract (Höjer et al., 2007).

Discussion

Descriptions from the respective countries indicate a range of commonalities and differences in terms of models of welfare and current positions of supervision in child welfare agencies. Sweden is often claimed to be an example of the social democratic welfare state model (Esping-Andersen, 1996), in that most welfare services and activities are organized and financed by the state (local or national) and based on universalistic principles with high levels of social security payments. England is similarly viewed as a liberal welfare state, whereas South Africa is presented as a developing welfare state, in which welfare services are marginally developed. One of the similarities of the models of welfare in each of the countries is that they are

currently in flux, and this has implications for social work. As mentioned, in South Africa recent structural change in welfare services has left the statutory child welfare services in turmoil. Social work in England has not fared well under the modernizing agenda for welfare reforms, as evidenced by the workforce shortfalls in high density urban areas. In Sweden the erosion of the general welfare benefit system has had an impact on the reality of social work, and social workers are leaving those areas most pressured, such as in child protection. This shift in the workforce also resonates with the other two countries. Whilst we accept that we are not comparing 'like with like', links can be made with the functions of supervision and explanatory frameworks described, and deductions drawn that could form part of an agenda for change for policy, policy makers and the profession.

Supervision in England and South Africa is focused predominantly on an administrative function that we would argue has links with bureaucratic and market logics, with ideas of organizational professionalism and with NPM. In both countries supervisors also address educative and supportive issues; nonetheless these may become secondary to more pressing concerns, as described. In England the debate in the professional press and beyond, following a recent child protection scandal, suggests that social work is becoming too bureaucratic and rule-based in its regulation as opposed to judgement-based. NPM has been criticized for creating an approach to social work that is short term, performance driven (Lifting the Burdens Task Force, 2008) and undermining of professional values (Richards et al., 2005), and similar perceptions, in different degrees, hold in the two other countries. We recognize the importance of addressing procedural and statutory requirements within child welfare, which may be viewed as a positive force within a strictly regulated system. Nonetheless we note this model's shortcomings as mentioned and challenge agency supervisors to take a more critical and balanced view of the predominant culture that they may be perpetuating in supervision. We are also mindful of their heavy workloads as described and recommend that their needs are addressed by senior managers in child welfare agencies and policy makers as an integral part of promoting workforce sustainability and safe practice.

External supervision in Sweden draws more heavily on educative and support functions of supervision and on practice knowledge based on 'professional logic', since these supervisees have influence not only on the content that is practice lead, but also on the type of supervisor selected for such work. This supervisor/supervisee relationship also has a good fit with tenets of occupational professionalism, given the high status ascribed to the role of the former and the professional power that can be exercised by the latter. The shortcomings, as noted, are that it is too removed from practice,

is isolated from the organization and takes place in secluded rooms. A further weakness to this 'arm's length' position is that it may diminish professional efficacy to exert pressure for organizational change.

The educative function of supervision is likely to be less strong if the supervisor has not received the right level of training. If practitioners involved in complex child welfare cases feel that this is the case then this is likely to affect morale and confidence and the quality of practice. The vignettes described would suggest that in South Africa and England more is required in terms of initial and developmental training of supervisors. One of the implications for policy makers and trainers is to address this training gap at agency and university level. Such initiatives could become an expected requirement in all three countries for all social work supervisors to be trained to a required level, since without adequately trained supervisors practice will not be safe.

If supervision is to be a force for change, then training of supervisors, whether internal or external to the agency, may need rethinking. This may include training that enables them to help practitioners reflect critically on their practice in the wider structural, political and global context of social work and its links with oppressed and marginalized groups (Phillipson, 2009). It may involve work that develops cross-discipline supervision with allied professionals, such as in learning ways to supervise jointly complex cases, within a framework of shared case responsibility. Similarly, different configurations of supervision both horizontally and vertically within the agency may draw on practice wisdom from personnel who have less direct practice but whose judgement is sound. Thinking laterally about supervision may suggest opportunities that enable supervisors and their supervisees to develop new, bottom-up knowledge from practice. Supervisors are in a strong position, with their supervisees, to log needs that have not been met, collect information about service shortfalls, and work out how to act individually and collectively to bring about change (Phillipson, 2009). Further, co-working complex cases with supervisees and developing 'on the job' supervision is likely to give confidence to the latter and enable the supervisor to keep attuned to the perspective of the service user. In so doing she/he may form new allegiances with service users and also be more alert to keeping their perspective at the heart of the supervisory process. Initiatives such as these are likely to help supervisors (re)gain their professional voice and standing as supervisors. Creating new forms of professional language and 'professional logic' may help empower supervisors to be more vocal about deficiencies in the system and speak out against, for example, injustices that are affecting worker morale. They may use 'market logic' to calibrate the cost of staff recruitment, and 'professional logic' to demand that supervision

throughout the organization be given higher priority in a drive to create more sustainable practice. This may include buying in external supervision, drawing on the Swedish model, investing in coaching and mentoring or in advanced-level training in supervision, but only if the shortcomings of the model are addressed.

Creating a safe culture and environment in which workers can deal with uncertainty and discuss their weaknesses and failings is an important element of supervision, and this was a key element within the three country settings. Indeed, it has long been held (Reder et al., 1993) that workers not in receipt of the right level of support are potentially dangerous in practice. Maintaining honesty and trust in the supervisory relationship is one of its hallmarks and strengths. It should enable the parties to feel able to share when their respective work capacities have been reached. As mentioned, it is not uncommon for social workers in Sweden to leave their external supervisor when they feel they have nothing further to learn. Changing a supervisor who is also the line manager within a statutory agency in England and South Africa may be more problematic, but it may still be right. Similarly it may be hard for a practitioner to be honest about not coping with a case when their supervisor is also their performance manager. Further, as described in the English study, supervisors who are also managers may be reluctant to discuss their work pressures with their line managers since this may be counter to the ethos of managers being seen to manage. The perfunctory level of supervision between middle and senior management as noted in both the English and South African studies would suggest that, in Ewett's terms, neither good occupational professionalism nor organizational professionalism is being promoted. Setting good examples of supervision at all levels within the child welfare agency is likely to lead to safer and more honest practice and could be used as an exemplar for change within policy documents and training manuals.

Reflecting on the three stories has enabled us to be more objective about the qualities of supervision in our respective countries. On balance, the system of external supervision in Sweden, running in tandem as it does with internal agency supervision, would seem to have much to offer. On the other hand such a system, influenced by therapeutic thinking, may lead to the individualization of the understanding of social and organizational problems and diminish the potential of social work. We recognize that there is no one solution that addresses the current challenges within social work, and that agendas for change in supervision will be informed by the particular national contexts. Nonetheless an overriding consideration is that supervisors in child welfare require high level skills (Ferguson, 2005) if they are to enable their supervisees to make ethically sound professional judgements.

We are of the view that strengthening this relationship in all its aspects is an essential element in the transformation of current social work.

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